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Understanding the coping strategies of international students: A qualitative approach

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Abstract

International students encounter a range of additional challenges as a part of their tertiary study experience. A qualitative approach was used to understand the challenges faced by international students, coping strategies that promoted their personal resilience and advice they have for future international students. Twenty-two international students from an Australian university participated in four focus groups. The challenges identified by students included adjustment, social isolation, English language skills, academic difficulties, unmet expectations, employment, culture shock and psychological distress. Participants shared their own personal experiences and strategies used by them to cope and identified strategies that future students could use prior to leaving their home country and whilst in Australia to improve their adjustment. Uses of international student stories in prevention interventions are discussed.

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Introduction

International students are the largest service export industry in countries such as U.S.A., Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Australia is the third most popular English speaking destination with students coming from more than 190 countries (DFAT, 2010). Studying abroad is not without its challenges and there is evidence that international students experience a range of adjustment issues that can impact on their study and overall experience. While universities often provide support services for international students, the personal stories of international students, identifying challenges and strategies to overcome them can be helpful to other international students. Using qualitative methodology, this study will explore international student personal stories to understand the challenges they face when studying in a foreign country and/or culture and the strategies they found effective in overcoming them.

University students can experience a range of stressors such as academic demands, new educational and social environments, as well as issues stemming from normal development such as psychological autonomy, identity formation, and economic independence (Furnham, 2004). International students often experience additional difficulties. A number of studies, using quantitative methods, have investigated the challenges of international students. These studies indicate a range of stressors, such as culture shock, discrimination, adjustment to unfamiliar cultural norms, values and customs, communication/language difficulties, education system differences, financial hardships, lack of appropriate accommodation, isolation and loneliness, homesickness and loss of established support and social networks (Bradley, 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007; Leong & Chou, 1996; Msengi, 2007; Roberts, Golding, Towell, & Weinreib, 1999). These stressors can contribute

to adjustment difficulties of the international students and can impact on their learning and wellbeing.

In general, academic, emotional and social difficulties of the international students have been identified previously through quantitative methods (Aubrey, 1991) Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003). Not feeling included, accepted, or understood by the domestic students and the host society can disrupt the acculturation process and can lead to emotional problems (Sakuria, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). A range of socio-cultural and language barriers are associated with limited interaction of the international students with the host students and academics. Subsequently, this impacts on their academic success (Baratt & Huba, 1994; Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). While there is no difference in the psychological distress levels found in domestic and international students (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Stallman, 2010), stressors specific to international student adjustment have been found to exacerbate stress in other areas of international students' lives (Stallman & Hurst, 2010). How students cope in response to these adjustment stressors can impact on their health outcomes. Differences in predominant coping styles have been identified between cultures. Asian cultures, for example may be less inclined to seek professional help and be more likely to use more maladaptive coping strategies such as repression, avoidance and other passive coping strategies (Bjorck, Cuthbertson, Thurman, & Lee, 2001; Leong & Lau, 2001; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008). These types of strategies are associated with poorer health outcomes (Sheu, Lin, & Hwang, 2002). Resultant negative thoughts and beliefs and poor coping behaviours can lead to an increase in overall stress levels (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Williams & Berry, 1991; Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). As a result international students have reported psychological problems, such as depression, worry and stress as well as somatic or physical complaints such as appetite, fatigue and sleep problems (Lin & Yi, 1997; Mori, 2000; Zautra et al., 1989).

Finally, quantitative procedures have shown positive coping and resilient behaviours to have a large effect on the adjustment of international students (Wang, 2009). These include self-knowledge and a greater understanding of others, an expanded worldview, help-seeking behaviour, and letting go of problems. Social interactions, including building network of friendships and romantic relations with domestic students and natives (Heikinheimo & Shite, 1986; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Surdam & Collins, 1984) and establishing relationships with instructors and advisors (Msengi, 2007) have an important role in the healthy adjustment of international students. Personality characteristics also play a role with interpersonal skills and flexibility associated with better adjustment (Wang, 2009).

It is important to note that quantitative procedures, in spite of the advantages, are not free from limitations. The measures used in these procedures may be written and developed for limited cultures and cohorts and may not be suitable for international students, who consist of numerous heterogeneous subgroups (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008). Also, quantitative methods due to a priori assumptions have predetermined response areas and a limited range of pre-coded responses, so may not capture the diversity of human experience, especially the complex nature of distress and coping strategies (Miller, Worthington, Muzurovic, Tipping, & Goldman, 2002). These limitations are addressed by qualitative methods, which are more flexible and encourage reporting of actual experiences that are participant driven (Kagee, 2004).

A handful of qualitative studies have also emerged in the literature. These studies are elaborating and clarifying the themes highlighted by the quantitative procedures. Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia (2008) interviewed 200 Australian international students. They found that two-thirds of the participants experienced loneliness in their earlier phase of the stay. Off campus discrimination was also reported by another study (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Mismatched expectations were leading to distress and feelings of

inadequacy and alienation (Major, 2005). Twenty percent of the international students studied by McLachlan & Justine (2009) reported emotional problems and Ang and Liamputting (2008) supported underutilisation of counselling. Bradley (2000) and Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) confirmed practical issues such as accommodation and transportation. An exploration of academic difficulties indicated adjustment to teaching style as a major difficulty (Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007; Townsend & Poh, 2008). Yan and Berliner (2009) explored the academic stressors. Interviews with international students revealed English language proficiency (Trice, 2003), interactive teaching style and critical thinking (Lieberman, 1994) as factors that hindered learning. Brown (2008) in an ethnographic study found that frustration and anxiety associated with language was associated with initial settlement difficulties. Researchers are starting to use qualitative methods to enhance the international students' adaptation. Cross cultural interaction is reported as a successful way to enhance these students adjustment (Ujitani & Volet, 2008).

Qualitative Method

Using a qualitative methodological approach, this study seeks to compliment findings from previous quantitative-based studies regarding understanding both the challenges international students face but also the specific practical strategies they have found successful in overcoming issues. There are advantages to the qualitative approach adopted for this study (Khawaja, et al., 2008; Miller, et al., 2002). Rather than explaining causes of change, qualitative methods focus on *understanding* social phenomena from the student's perspective gained through their life experiences. By collating rich and valid process data, this ethnographical approach seeks to capture multiple realities, leave the participant's perspectives intact, and allow a finer and more accurate distinction of concepts (Steckler, McLeroy, Goodman, Bird, & McCormick, 1992; Wint & Frank, 2006). A qualitative approach using focus groups was selected for a range of reasons. This method is generally

less time consuming (Culley & Hudson, 2007) and inhibiting and is an effective way to study the experiences of a particular group. It generates discussion, promotes an exchange of ideas, is culturally sensitive and empowers the minorities (Sim, 1998). Finally, it is useful to study the needs of the participants and this process capitalises on communication among the participants for generating ideas to manage issues (Kitzinger, 1995).

Research Aim

Previous studies indicate that international students encounter a range of adjustment difficulties crossing cultural, practical, and academic areas. Most studies into international student adjustment are quantitative, which precludes an understanding of the richness of international students' lived experiences. Qualitative methods were used to develop a thorough understanding of the narratives and personal experiences of students. Further, statistics indicate that most students are successful in completing their studies and tenure in an overseas university. There are probably some protective factors and coping strategies that help the international students in managing adjustment difficulties, however these behaviours and strategies warrant further investigation. The goals of the study were two-fold: firstly to explore the lived experiences of international students to understand their adjustment difficulties and secondly to understand what strategies they use to encounter these difficulties. It was expected that the information and coping strategies gathered in this research could be used to guide and assist future international students as well as university services that assist these students.

Method

Participants

Twenty-two international students (7 men and 15 women) participated in the focus groups. Their mean age was 27.32 years ($SD = 5.46$; range = 20 - 40). Most (77.3%) of them were single and a lesser number (22.7%) were married. Their mean duration of stay in

Australia was 14.63 months ($SD = 9.48$; range 3 - 36). Table 1 shows the demographics of the participants. The participants were enrolled in different years and faculties. Except one student, all were enrolled as full time students. A few worked on part time or casual basis. Participants were from South Korea (7), China (4), India and Taiwan (2 from each country) and from Vietnam, East-Timor, Iran, Indonesia, Mauritius, Singapore, and Nigeria (1 from each country).

Instruments

The probes developed for the focus groups consisted of two main questions. Firstly, the participants were asked to comment on “the difficulties of the international students”. Follow-up probes were related to difficulties encountered immediately after arrival, adjustment issues as a result of not being prepared to study in a foreign country, mismatched expectations, isolation, the different study and living style and psychological distress. Secondly, participants were asked to share their experiences and advice for assisting the other international students. They were also asked to comment on “how international students cope and what suggestions they have for other international students”. Follow-up probes were associated with successful strategies the participants would like other fellow international students to implement.

Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University's Ethics committee. Participants were recruited through the International Student Services electronic bulletins and through emails from course coordinators. Interested students were invited to attend one of the four focus groups, organised on different days and times during the mid-semester break. The authors who are trained clinical psychologists with extensive clinical and research experience of working with students conducted the focus groups. The duration of each focus group was around 90 minutes. The sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed. A research

assistant was present to take down extra notes to ensure that all comments were recorded. The focus group was conducted in a pleasant meeting room where chairs were arranged around a table and refreshments were offered to enhance a relaxed atmosphere. The participants were first briefed about the study and asked to complete the consent and demographic forms. Researchers indicated that previous investigations have revealed that adjustment to foreign country and a university is a challenge for international students, who may subsequently experience distress. Nevertheless many international students have been resilient and have managed the difficulties and challenges effectively. The participants were informed that the purpose of the study was therefore, to validate the already existing information as well as to collate ideas and strategies that promote adjustment and academic success among international students. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary in nature and they were free to discontinue at any time. The confidential and anonymous nature of the study was explained also. All members were encouraged to participate in of the focus group. The researchers then initiated the discussion by using appropriate micro counselling skills. Using the probes developed for the study they encouraged a debate among the participants. Clarifications were sought in the case of unclear responses. A special emphasis was on ensuring that the discussion was not dominated by one or two members. The facilitators continuously monitored the participation, and from time to time went around the group to gently encourage the less vocal participants to express their point of view. At the end of the session, the participants were debriefed, thanked and presented with a \$20 gift voucher for their participation in the study.

Results

Data analysis

The recorded data were transcribed verbatim for analysis. A research assistant, trained in qualitative analysis, coded the data. The process of identifying commonly occurring

themes was facilitated with the use of MAX qualitative data analysis (QDA). This software was used to code, sort, and categorise textual data. The data, collected from four focus group discussions, was stripped of any identifying information and imported into the software program for analysis. Text was coded through a process of scrolling through each text and colour highlighting relevant passages and assigning open codes to them. Consistent with grounded theory method of identifying emergent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), concepts were then categorised using a process of axial coding. The process involves the identification of central categories that link other codes together to identify emergent themes and the software automatically generates a count of codes and categories. Ten percent of transcribed data was randomly selected for inter-rater reliability. This data was coded independently by a second research assistant. The reliability between the two coders was 80.39 %.

Themes

The data analysis identified 295 open codes and these were categorised according to six themes. These themes in order of proportion of coded verbalizations were: studies (27%), social isolation (18%), culture shock (13%), adjustment (12%), psychological stress (9%), English language skills (8%), employment (7%), and unmet expectations (6%). The emerging themes are described. Each theme is discussed first in terms of challenges associated with the theme, followed by potential strategies used and recommended by the participants.

Adjustment. Participants were asked to comment on their experiences during the initial period after arrival. Generally, everybody agreed that the first few days, weeks, and months were very difficult. The majority of the participants experienced homesickness. As most of them belonged to collectivistic societies, they felt that they were not prepared for independent living and often lacked the skills and knowledge of surviving in an individualistic society. *"I was not prepared when I came here for the real life. I was a kind*

of a princess back home and here I have to do everything so you have to grow up” (Female, Focus Group 3, China).

At times settling in a new environment was difficult. International students were not aware of the accommodation rules, regulations and the process. Renting an accommodation was reported as a major stumbling block. *“It is not easy to get a house, you need a qualification and you need enough money. The real estate agent said that a qualification was prior residence” (Female, Focus Group 1, China).* Lack of familiarity with the day to day procedures and public transport was also considered a hassle. *“When I first caught a bus I didn’t know how to press the buzzer, I was screaming stop, stop” (Female, Focus Group 2, South Korea).* Lack of information about food outlets and availability was sometimes a concern. Additionally, high prices of food items and limited shopping hours took some by surprise. *“Another thing is lunch in the university is expensive. When I first came here I was surprised that students brought lunch that they had cooked at home which is a cheaper way of eating” (Female, Focus Group 1, Singapore).* Similarly, another participant said: *“I discovered that all the shops closed at 5 pm and it was hard for me. I was wondering what I was going to do. In Singapore some of the shops are closed at 10 pm but no one tells you these things”, (Female, Focus Group 1, Singapore).* They also reported that a general lack of information about daily matters at times restricted their adjustment.

The participants suggested that new international students to be active in seeking information. *“Students need this information ... but they don’t know where to go so it is very difficult ... once they know where to get help it is easier. So students need to be active rather than waiting for help from other people” (Female, Focus Group 1, Vietnam).* The participants suggested good ideas to manage homesickness. Frequent phone calls, email exchanges and communication through Skype and Facebook were proposed as some of the measures to overcome homesickness. Moreover, in order to expedite the early settlement and

adjustment, participants recommended international students to start the groundwork before leaving their home country. International students were advised to organise accommodation before departure or at least arrive prepared with good knowledge about how to find accommodation. Furthermore, familiarity with the transport system and the layout of the city and university campus is also possible through internet prior to departure. *“Use technology as much as possible. Before I came here I searched Google maps, YouTube, DVD’s, videos. All this technology actually helped me get a view of what Brisbane is all about and what the Australian lifestyle is all about” (Male Focus Group 2, China).* Similarly, the use of GPS, to navigate around the campus and the city was recommended. *“It is one of the best resources for your car or when you are walking around. ”Just put in your destination and you are there.” (Male, Focus Group 4, India).* Some participants emphasised the significance of attending orientation and campus events as a way of gathering information about their new university and its’ surrounding. One participant reported problems as a result of missing out the orientation. *“ I missed the orientation program. I came to know about it by interacting with people like Australians” (Male, Focus Group 2, India).* Individual orientation sessions were considered helpful. *“I had one to one introduction and that was good as I was able to ask a lot of questions regarding the life at the university” (Female, Focus Group 1, South Korea).*

The participants emphasised the need to become independent prior to departure or immediately after arrival. *“International students should have some independent skills like how to survive in a very unfamiliar society. How to deal with bank accounts, how to deal with your roommates and schoolmates. (Male, Focus Group 3, China).* There was also an emphasis on cooking skills as it enables a person to prepare less expensive meals consistent with personal tastes. Those who come from very sheltered environments were advised to practice independent living before their departures. One student supported this notion by

commenting “... *in China many families only one child they don't allow them to do any house work but before you come to the Australia they should take half a year to learn some skills like cooking and manage a bank account to make them independent. So when you come to a new country you can and adapt to your new surroundings very quickly*” (Male, Focus Group 3, China).

Social Isolation. Most participants reported experiencing social isolation and loneliness. It was particularly difficult for those students who did not have relatives or acquaintances in Australia. Many of the statements in this category were related to difficulties in developing friendships with the domestic students. The international students revealed that it was common to have minimal interaction with the domestic students despite their desire to do so; they were often unable to develop friendships. “*The students studying with us all have their own friends and everyone disappears after class. I feel that there is no opportunity for them to interact with us except in one or two pracs [practical classes] where we all meet but no one is talking about personal things. All we talk about is study.*” (Male, Focus Group 4, India). Further, busy lifestyles and already existing networks of the domestic students were identified as factors that prevented the social links between the sojourners and domestic students. The participants commented that sometimes international students are modest, passive, shy, and retiring and therefore unable to pursue friendships with the locals.

Overall, the participants stressed the importance of social interaction. They suggested that international students should avoid loneliness by seeking the company of their own nationals if friendships with the domestic students were absent. “*Have special days like Chinese New Year. In my house we always have some special meals together which makes me feel comfortable because we are from the same culture*” (Female, Focus Group 2, China). Further, international students were recommended to overcome their shyness by interacting with the domestic students irrespective of the level of their language proficiency. Participants

emphasised practicing social skills. Various strategies to overcome the language barriers were suggested. *"I try to say hello and then smile at them" (Female, Focus Group 3, Malaysia)*. Further, they recommended that students familiarise themselves with interests, hobbies, and activities enjoyed by local students, so that it was possible to initiate conversations with the domestic students. *"I read newspapers to try and understand cultural differences in trying to adopt western culture."*(Female, Focus Group 1, South Korea). It was also considered important to understand the host society's beliefs and ideas. *"For international students to be close to Australians it is important to get accustomed to their way of thinking (Male, Focus Group2, Taiwan)*.

Participants recommended the new international students to participate in a range of activities and events until they are able to find the ones that best suit them. They suggested that newcomers needed to be mindful of the notion that one size does not fit all. Joining clubs and organisation was considered a good way of developing friendships with domestic students. *"These activities create fellowship. So if you can participate in all the events here you really can find your second home"* (Male, Focus Group 2, China).

There was an emphasis on attending Western activities as a way of learning about the Australian culture and a way of life. *"Extra curricula activities and join some western clubs. University has a sailing group and a dance club they are all westerners and it is very good for international students to join. We join most clubs and it is a very good environment for us to meet more Australians"* (Female, Focus Group 3, China). Sharing a house with Australian students was considered as one of the method for developing links with the locals. There were suggestions to use internet mailing lists for developing friendships. Finally, exchanging language skills were considered as a way of developing friendships.

English Language Skills. The participants reported English proficiency as a significant challenge. Limited skills sometimes led to poor adjustment. A major problem was

difficulty understanding the Australian accent, which often affected studies. *“My course has two Lecturers. The first one is very clear with her pronunciation and I understand what she is talking about and I can get a good mark but the second one in the last semester changed to a man and he had a very Australian accent plus he moves around so much I cannot understand him which is difficult” (Female Focus Group 3, East-Timor).*

Moreover, international students were also concerned about other people understanding their accents. Limited English language proficiency slowed down the speech and the confidence of the international students. *“When the Lecturer asks us a question, I can't raise my hand to answer because I am afraid that my grammar is not good enough and I am a slower speaker than Australian students. I know the answer but when I don't know the English vocabulary I don't answer the question and I feel depressed” (Female, Focus Group 3, Indonesia).*

Limited language proficiency reduced the international students' comprehension of the subject matter in the class room. Further, these deficits often impacted academic reading and writing. International students reported that the process of reading repeatedly with the help of dictionaries slowed them tremendously. For some even reading the exam paper took a long time. Further, writing was often a difficult task. Overall, far more time was used to accomplish the academic tasks. *“I (used to) do the same (task) in two days when usually it takes four to five days which is more time” (Female, Focus Group 2, China).*

Perception of limited English language skills was often identified as a major obstacle in developing social links. *“In the first year it was hard for me to find a friend because I don't talk that much sometimes because I am scared that my English is not really good and that makes me shy” (Female, Focus Group 4, China).* Due to these fears the international students started to avoid interaction with domestic students. *“I have had many opportunities*

to make Australian friends but I didn't try too hard because I wasn't on top of my English"
(Male, Focus Group 2, China).

When asked to suggest ideas to address these challenges, the international students stressed the significance of mastering and learning the English language before leaving their country of origin. *"It is easier and cheaper to learn English in your own country than in Australia"*(Female, Focus Group 4, Iran). The advantage of learning the language formally or informally through social interactions was pointed out. *"The first semester was bad but in the second semester I tried some social activity. I joined a sports club and I took English classes so everything improved after that semester"* (Male, Focus Group 1, China). The participants' message for future international students was *"not to stress"* if their language skills were not of an excellent level. Participants reported that stepping out of their discomfort and pushing themselves to interact with the Australians helped them to improve their language skills. *"After you step out of your comfort zone and join a group it is much easier to establish networks"*(Female, Focus Group 1, Singapore). Interactions with others and as a part of job were identified as helpful strategies to master the English language. Joining clubs and other organisations was considered as enhancing the language skills. Finally, practice was considered as a main key of success. The English proficiency was associated with academic achievement of the international students.

Studies: The participants spent a significant proportion of the time discussing study related issues. In general, international students were familiar with written exams, but unfamiliar with written assignments, which are commonly included for assessment in Australia. This practice caused significant problems for participants. *"Everything was good at university except assignments. We are not used to assignments back in our country"* (Male, Focus Group 1, China). They experienced challenges while preparing essays. Group work was another complication and at times international students found it very hard to manage it

at the academic and social level. Similarly, the international students often found it very difficult to interact with the tutors and lecturers. There was a general consensus that their academic performance is lower than what they achieve in their country of origin.

When asked to share the methods that helped them cope with their studies, participants considered being organised and systematic as important to cope with the academic pressure. Time management and prioritising assessments according to the assessment's weight, also emerged as an important skills. *"I do a big timetable and have it on my wall. I use those marker pens and colour code them so I know which one is important, which one is due and the ones I have already done"* (Female, Focus Group 3, Indonesia). Participants reported that preparing for the lectures and tutorials in advance was helpful. Recording lectures was also suggested as a useful strategy. *"I would like to share something about the Lectures. They do not have recordings for people who are slower. So I would advise students that they have a personal recorder to grab all the information and make their own notes."* (Female, Focus Group 3, South Korea).

When asked to suggest strategies to overcome the unfamiliarity and difficulty with the written assignments, the international students emphasised studying the marking criteria thoroughly before commencing the work on an assignment and referring back to it during the writing process to ensure the assignment is meeting the criteria. *"When I do the assignment I refer to the marking criteria. This is helpful because I can see the explanation and details of the content in each section"* (Female, Focus Group 4, Iran). The participants found that using a mentoring scheme as an effective way of coping with the study related challenges. Sojourners were suggested to seek help from mentors as a way of addressing numerous study related issues. Participants stressed the importance of being proactive and seeking clarification and advice from the lecturers and tutors before commencing a written task. *"It is really important to talk to the Tutors and Lecturers and tell them about your concern and tell*

what you are thinking and ask them if it is right or wrong. Most of the time the criteria is not specific e.g. apply critical thinking and then you will say "What is critical thinking? It is better if you go straight to your Tutor or email them or talk to them and ask them what you need to write your assignment" (Male, Focus Group 1, China).

Seeking help from senior students, particularly if they were from the same country and working with fellow students was also regarded as a way of mastering the concepts and the subject matter. Again, participants suggested international students also seek assistance from the International Students Services, an organisation within the university that helps with the editing and proof reading of the written assignments along with a range of other academic oriented assistance and support. *"The language is a big problem. When I do assignments it is really hard to write and with poor English I can't write correct grammar or correct sentences. I didn't get help with this so maybe I will try and get help from International Student Services because they have that kind of system and I will ask someone who has good English just to correct my grammar."* (Female, Focus Group 1, China).

Unmet expectations. The participants' responses indicated that occasionally their expectations about the university and courses did not match with their experiences. In many cases the Australian university life was different from what they had experienced in their own countries. They were often surprised at this mismatch. Some expected the environment to be more entertaining. *"In my country going to college is fun and time flies. We also went to local parties and movies"* (Male, Focus Group 3, India). Their expectations were influenced by the media, particularly Hollywood movies and they anticipated the Australian university environment to be similar. *"When I watch a movie on university life where people study and they have social activities like a party or they go to some club it is not true"* (Female, Focus Group 3, South Korea).

Overall, a few of the participants reported frustration at not being able to develop friendships with local students as they had expected. Some expected a much higher level of support, resources, and mentoring system. Some found the courses not consisted with what they had anticipated. A few felt locked in a program that they entered without adequate understanding. However, withdrawing from the course was shameful and not acceptable. *“I had a picture of the university and the course, {course name}. The picture that I got was very different as it is not an easy course and I thought it would be and I would sail through it. So when I arrived here it was very tough” (Male, Focus Group 4, India).*

A number of international students assumed that it would be easy to secure part time jobs in Australia. There was an expectation that studies would lead to employment. *“When you come over here, it’s not easy to get a job or get a part time job. You think it is easy like just walking into Australia, you are young, you can go anywhere and get a job and you have some experience and specific skills” (Female, Focus Group 1, Taiwan).* The discussions indicted that after the initial surprise and disappointment, students gradually learned about the reality. Their suggestion for the other international students was to gather information about overseas universities before departure so that they are better prepared.

Culture Shock: Participants were from diverse cultures, which differed from the Australian culture. Therefore, culture shock was experienced by some of them due to different types of beliefs and value systems. *“When I came to Australia I found it very hard to be involved in Australian society, it is a huge culture shock” (Female, Focus Group 3, Indonesia).* Participants revealed that the communication between the international students and their host country was often stilted due to the social and cultural differences of the two groups. Lack of knowledge about each other’s cultural style hindered communication. *“I’m not sure if everyone likes the way I interact or not. I keep thinking what is the best way to interact with students?” (Female, Focus Group 1, Mauritius).*

On many occasions the courteous and passive style of the Asian international students was thought to be interpreted as lack of confidence by the mainstream Australians. *“Young Asian people do not like showing off even though we have 100% skills, we don’t say how confident we are or how good we are even though we think we can do something really well, we just say I am good at this. It’s kind of a humble attitude. Some Australian people think we are not confident or we don’t have enough knowledge so it is a kind of cultural difference (Male, Focus Group 1, South Korea).* The international students were not used to what they regarded as the informal interpersonal style of the locals. They felt that their behaviour was frequently misunderstood as cold and aloof. In face to face interactions they often experienced a difficulty maintaining eye contact and at times felt that their personal space was invaded by the domestic students. *“My Tutor was staring into my eyes and I found it uncomfortable, but I have to get used to it, sometimes I look away and he is still staring at me”(Female, Focus group 1, Vietnam).* They reported that in their experiences the social interactions between the domestic and international students often seemed superficial. While they felt able to discuss the coursework, it was difficult for them to share a joke or to converse about a personal matter or interest. Participants also indicated that even though most of the locals were courteous, there were incidents of harassment and discrimination. *“I think Aussies are friendly and helpful, some are not though. I was walking along the road when a car approached and people inside the car shouted at me, it was dark and I was really shocked. There was another case where one of my friends was walking on the street and they had a similar experience. It was pretty bad, but some of the Aussies especially the younger generation when they are drunk are anti-social” (Male, Focus Group 1, South Korea).*

Various suggestions, to overcome the cultural and social barriers, were provided by the international students. Participants emphasised the importance of demonstrating confidence. *“Students should be confident especially in front of other people” (Female,*

Focus Group 1, Vietnam). Gathering information about the host country's culture, through an internet, was regarded as helpful. They also suggested that students establish contacts in Australia before arrival. These pre established links could then be used in the settlement process and in addressing gaps in knowledge. Additionally, participants advised newcomers to be vigilant and to avoid risky places or situations.

Seeking Employment. Generally, international students desire to work part-time while studying. Students and their families often anticipate an opportunity to recover some of the expenses of tuition fees and living expenses through employment. *"OK so he is going out (overseas) and it is a very expensive affair but it is not a problem in a couple of months he will do his own work (job). In reality, it does not happen"* (Male, *Focus Group 4, India*). Those who came to study for professional degrees expected to obtain a part-time or casual job in their discipline. However, they faced many unexpected hurdles and felt demoralised when they were unsuccessful in securing employment. Participants recalled that they were asked to provide referee reports and previous work experience in Australia was often a salient criterion, which they failed to meet and thus were not successful in securing a job. *"I think I am ready to work in Australia because I have similar experience in my country but here the prospective employer asks for experience in Australia or a reference so it was very hard to get a job (Female, Focus Group 3, Indonesia)*. Moreover, at times the jobs were located away from the campus and it was difficult for students to travel to and from the job location. In spite of these complexities, employment was considered as a positive experience for an overseas student as it helped financially and socially, and expedited English language adeptness. *"It is really hard to get a job here but once you get that you will have more chance to interact"* (Female, *Focus Group1, Taiwan*).

When asked for suggestions, participants advised other international students to pursue jobs in a realistic manner, by not aspiring for professional positions, but settling for

even simple and casual jobs. Another suggestion was to explore jobs among one's own nationals settled in Australia. The international students were urged to gain thorough information about job requirements and to prepare carefully for job interviews. Possessing a car was often considered an advantage when seeking employment, as it allowed students to travel and consider jobs at more locations. *"I think if you have a car you can use it to get a job"* (Male, Focus Group 3, China). Finally, the participants commented that the chance of employment increases once students have completed their degrees. However, they still recommended others not to have false hopes in order to avoid disappointment. *"Once they finish their degrees there is a good chance of getting a job but they shouldn't expect it"* (Male, Focus Group 1, China).

Psychological stress. Participants reflected on their own experiences and reported that it was common for international students to feel stressed, anxious and depressed. International students, who were above average students in their home country, had high expectations of themselves as overseas students. Depression was often a consequence of not being able to meet these expectations. *"Yes when I was in my country I received a very good mark but here it is a problem, it makes me depressed. I try and get a good mark but I am still struggling with it. It is not easy"* (Female, Focus Group 1, Korea). Some felt that their confidence and self-esteem declined when they failed to obtain the expected grades. *"I feel 100% comfortable that I can get 6 or 7 [distinctions] but it is usually 4 or 5 [average]. I was starting to think that maybe it is my problem or maybe there is something wrong with me and maybe we didn't discuss it very well"* (Male, Focus Group 1, China). The pressure to meet deadlines and the perception of having a limited time to submit assignments triggered stress. Moreover, difficulties in obtaining part-time or casual jobs as discussed earlier also contributed to this emotional turmoil.

The high cost of studying internationally created financial stress and worries for many students. *"The most important thing that international students are doing is spending a huge amount of money to study here. The money I am spending for my course is a big amount"* (Male, Focus Group 3, China). In many cases the students were under pressure to meet the demands of their families who had invested emotionally and financially in their goal to study overseas. Students frequently refrained from sharing their emotional problems with their family members, who had no idea about the challenges in a Western country and expected them to manage well on their own in a new country. *"There is a concept about students who go on to a new place especially to Australia. In one month's time they do part time work, they manage work and studies and they manage everything on their own"* (Male, Focus Group 4, India).

When asked to comment on the coping strategies used and advice for the others, the participants reported that after spending some months in studies overseas, they learnt the importance of setting realistic expectations for themselves. They realised the importance of taking time to settle in and adjust and suggested other international students to do the same. *"It's not your fault sometimes things just happen and you have to handle it ...you have got to see what is more important in life"* (Female, Focus Group 2, Mauritius). Exploration of resources and the available help was reiterated. Helpful stress management strategies were also suggested. *"Usually when I feel stressed I just let go for a moment and go for a walk. See new people and meet my own people"* (Female, Focus Group 3, China). Interacting and sharing problems with others from their own culture acted as a source of comfort and support. *"Sometimes it is hard to express yourself in English and sometimes if you have people from the same background you make your own language and they know how you feel. So we share our feelings and we feel better"* (Female, Focus Group 2, South Korea). There was an emphasis on work-life balance. *"We have to strike a balance between study and social life."*

On the academic side I manage my time for social outings with Asian and Australian people. It is fantastic here because you feel like you are part of the society not isolated” (Male, Focus Group 1, China). The act of sharing problems with other international students was considered as a helpful strategy. *“If we share our struggles with friends that would be a good idea! They might also have the same problems with this type of experience. Hopefully they can discuss this with me and tell me what I should do and maybe share their experiences” (Female, Focus Group 3, Indonesia).* Finally, participants indicated that by being aware of the obstacles in advance the students could manage stress better.

Discussion

The present study used a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of International students in Australia. The thematic analysis indicated that these students, faced challenges in all aspects of life, despite existing services to assist them. Further, they shared the strategies that they used to manage their difficulties and be resilient. Activities and ideas that promote the adjustment and academic success of the international students were discussed. Helpful suggestions were also provided for future international students. The findings supported the outcome of the previous quantitative studies as well as the emerging qualitative findings.

Challenges

Major themes identified by students were adjustment, social isolation, English language skills, studies, unmet expectations, culture shock, seeking employment and psychological stress. These are consistent with previous research (Leong & Chou, 1996; Msengi, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The challenges are mostly unexpected by students and they reported overcoming them by trial and error. The chronic and multiple daily challenges faced by international students explain previous findings that stress in one

domain exacerbates stress in other domains for international students rather than domestic students (McLachlan & Justine, 2009; Stallman & Hurst, 2010).

The initial time at a foreign university was generally considered very difficult by the international students (Furnham, 2004). Similar to previous studies (Bradley, 2000; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Sawir et al., 2008), the students in this study recalled that they encountered homesickness and many practical challenges of settling in. Consistent with Misra et al.'s (2003) finding, a lack of environmental mastery and social isolation was experienced by many participants. Even though students aspired for friendships with the domestic students (Sakurai et al., 2010), many failed to develop any friendly relations (Zhang & Bruton, 2007). Socio-cultural, interpersonal and language barriers were explained as the possible causes of limited interaction between the domestic and sojourners (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). Similarly, they found it hard to interact with tutors and lecturers. International students found it difficult to work with a group of other domestic students or to participate in class discussions (Chen, 1999; Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007; Mori, 2000; Townsend & Poh, 2008). With reference to study, major difficulties were related to preparing essay type assignments due to working with a second language and/or unfamiliarity with critical thinking (Aubrey, 1991; Liberman, 1994). Overall, international students had high expectations from their own selves and when unable to achieve these goals experienced a sense of failure and low self esteem. Academic stressors often led to psychological distress in the form of anxiety, depression, and somatisation (Lin & Yi, 1997; Zautra et al. 1989).

A number of participants reported that the university life and study was not what they had expected. Many of them arrived with superficial knowledge about their courses and the university and consequently faced frustration (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008). International students experienced culture shock as a result of the differences between their own culture

and the host culture (Lee & Rice, 2007; Major, 2005). Consistent with previous studies, students sought part time jobs, in order to compensate for their financial expenses (Li & Kaye, 1998; Roberts et al., 1999). However, securing an employment was a challenge as they lacked experience of working in the host country (Research Snapshot, 2009). Finally, their families had high expectations from them and were not aware about their challenges. As a result, international students avoided sharing their problems with their families.

Strategies applied and suggested

International students demonstrated resilience and reported using a broad range of strategies to cope with their difficulties (Wang, 2009). They recommended that future students use these procedures to allow successful adjustment and acculturation. Most of the participants felt that they were poorly prepared for their overseas education, therefore they emphasised the need to complete the ground work before departure. Future students were suggested to become familiar with the university, its educational system, courses and campus. They were also advised to learn about the city and the country where they were going to live. It was also considered important to understand the culture of the host society and to improve the English language proficiency through courses before departure. Based on their own experiences, the international students advised future students to prepare themselves for an independent life. Further, future students were also suggested to hone their day to day living skills before departure and to be prepared for the challenges ahead.

The international students found technology very beneficial in their adjustment process. They suggested future students to use internet for gathering information before leaving their country and after the arrival in the new country. Similarly, electronic devices such as mobile phones, emails, Facebook, Skype, and GPS were considered very useful to maintain a contact with family, friends as well as the flow of information and ones safety.

The participants recommended the newly arrived students to actively seek information and to attend all available orientation and briefing sessions.

The participants managed their social isolation by pushing their own selves to join a range of social organisations and activities. Establishing a link initially with the students from ones' own country was regarded as a good strategy. However, similar to previous findings (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Ujitani & Volet, 2008) the emphasis was on extending social networks to the host society. Future students were encouraged to step out of their comfort zone in order to interact with the locals. Consistent with previous literature building friendships and social support networks appeared to buffer stress (Lee et al., 2004).

Keeping in view the cultural differences, future students were recommended to learn about the interests of the domestic students, in order to establish a common ground for interaction and friendship. Consistent with previous results (Msengi, 2007), future students were advised to practice social skills to overcome their shyness and self consciousness.

Studies were a major challenge. Good organisation, time management, and prioritisation of tasks were strategies that helped the participants cope with their academic workload. A careful study of the marking criteria and consultations with tutors and lecturer were regarded as an important method to address the difficulties related with written assignments. This strategy has been supported by previous findings (Tseng & Newton, 2002). Additionally, recording of the lecture and help from senior students was another way to handle academic stress.

The international students dealt with employment frustrations by developing realistic expectations. They recommended accepting less skilled jobs instead of expecting professional jobs prior to the completion of their studies. Owning a car was regarded helpful as it allowed the student to work at places further away from the campus.

Finally, the international students found themselves managing their stress by sharing and discussing their problems with fellow students from their own country. They found others in the same circumstances could empathise and offer advice. They also used other ways to relax and self sooth themselves and recommended a work life balance. Being aware and prepared for the challenges was deemed a good strategy to counter emotional difficulties. Finally, it was suggested that future students seek professional help from the university counselling centres and international students' services if they experience psychological distress.

Limitation

While participants came from a range of cultures and countries, they were all enrolled at one metropolitan university. Therefore, results should be taken with caution as more research is needed to continue understanding the lived experiences of international students through a range of different methods. Focus group format may not suit all participants, particularly those who are shy and inhibited in a group situation.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first Australian study to use qualitative methodology to understand the challenges faced by international students. Additionally, the strategies used by them as well as their recommendations to future students, for a successful adaptation at an overseas university, were also documented. The findings not only increase our insight about the coping strategies of the international students, but provide information for developing effective university policies and teaching practices as well as counselling strategies to enhance the wellbeing of the international students. This data is being used by the authors to develop an intervention that uses students' stories to increase the successful adaption for subsequent international students.

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